

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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Chapter 8

Talking and listening in the later years

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Teachers know that, unless there are unusual circumstances, every child can talk and listen! Talking and the complementary skill of listening are a means of communicating to maintain social relationships, to get things done, to think and to learn and to present information. Just by looking at the different ways talk is used in our lives we realise there are different kinds of talk that serve different purposes. For example, a young student talking to friends about a weekend event will focus on *who* was there and *what* happened:

And I went to the zoo with Mum and my aunty and my little cousin and it was really funny when . . .

but any information about *why* certain events happened or any speculation about *how* things might have turned out differently given different circumstances would be relatively unlikely. There is also the shared interest and existing relationship between the student who is talking and the other students who are listening. This focus on *who* and *what* is perfectly acceptable and appropriate for the purpose of this kind of talk that could be called *social* talk.

Social talk is important in students' lives as it contributes to their learning social skills that help them function in different social contexts. Such skills as making, breaking and negotiating friendships and interacting with other students and adults, both inside and outside the home, are important for students to learn. Social talk also enables students to establish a self-identity and contributes to their self-esteem and, of course, provides entertainment. The focus on social talk is important in the later primary years, especially through a personal development curriculum area where teachers can plan activities that require extensive use of social talk. Second-language learners also benefit from opportunities to listen to other students express feelings and opinions as they become familiar with the culture and language structures of English.

As students move through the middle and upper years of primary schooling the role of *talking and listening to learn* takes on added importance as students engage with complex and diverse concepts across a wide range of subject areas. It is unlikely students will have many opportunities to listen to and use this kind of talk without deliberate teacher planning. This chapter presents some ideas for incorporating talking and listening to learn into a classroom program, but is prefaced by an overview of the kinds of talk (other than social) in which students engage in the classroom.

Kinds of talk in the classroom

Procedural talk

In the classroom teachers use talk to give instructions about how to do or make something. This is a kind of procedural or instructional talk and requires different language choices from social talk. Students are mostly required to listen to this kind of talk by the teacher in order to get things done and they need to be aware of the sequence of instructions, the final goal and the materials needed to complete the task successfully. Students reporting back after completing a task (recounting it) will also use this time-sequenced kind of talk: 'The first thing we did when we made our avalanche was . . .'

Presentational talk

Presenting information to an audience is another kind of classroom talk. Students should have had the opportunity to rehearse this talk before a presentation and therefore will be aware of the appropriate language for the topic and audience. For very young students or newly arrived second-language learners, who usually learn whole chunks of oral language in the early stages of English language acquisition, this rehearsed talk can be quite simple routines like greetings, thank yous and basic directions. Rehearsed talk in later primary years can include choral reading, prepared dramatic presentations and even assembly presentations. Talking to do something (procedural) and presentational talk are commonplace in the classroom and teachers need to make sure students are familiar with the different forms and specific criteria which characterise them. Teacher modelling and scaffolding of these kinds of talk through planned activities help students learn how to use them for different purposes and audiences.

Learning and thinking talk

Talk for learning and thinking is another kind of talk, and, again, teachers need deliberately to program opportunities for this kind of talk. It is characterised by students predicting outcomes or hypothesising, clarifying ideas, offering suggestions or challenging other children's ideas and is sometimes referred to as *exploratory talk*.

S1: *I think when we turn the handle on the eggbeater, the beaters turn in the same direction.*

S2: *No, they don't; see how when the big wheel goes around and locks into the smaller wheel, the beaters are moving in different directions.*

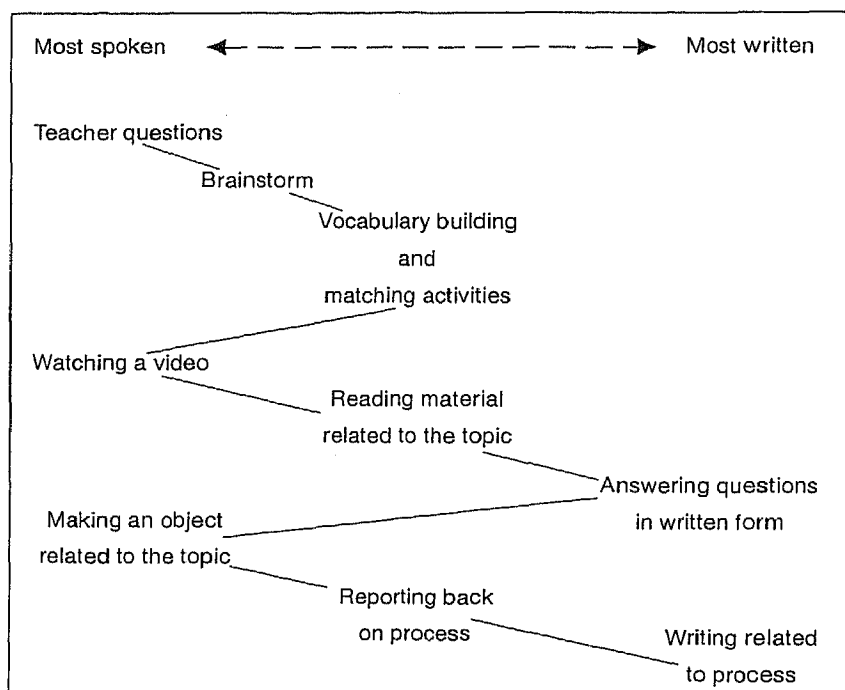
Although this kind of talk may incidentally result from an activity, a limited and *ad hoc* exposure to such a significant tool for learning does not give students sufficient opportunity to engage with tasks in a way that challenges them to think and articulate their thoughts as a means of talking themselves into deeper understanding. Walkerdine (1982: 138) writes about talk as a critical tool in helping children to reason and make sense of new concepts: ' . . . the linguistic system itself provides the tools necessary to formal reasoning'.

Planning for exploratory talk within a typical unit of work

Wells (1981) reminds us of the importance of talk in the learning process when he writes that talking is not only preliminary to reading and writing activities, but also an equal tool for learning. Classroom teachers need to be conscious of the role of talk in all activities, since talk is central to students' developing conceptual understanding. It must be deliberately planned for in any teacher program, in the same way that other language modes are planned for.

The remainder of this chapter demonstrates how talk can support learning in a unit of work on natural disasters, with a particular focus on exploratory talk, since this kind of talk is one that is often neglected.

In a typical unit of work such as the one used in this chapter, there is a constant backward and forward movement from more spoken-like to more written-like language as shown in the diagram below. While some tasks require only spoken language and others only written language, many classroom tasks require a combination of talking, listening, reading and writing.



The role of talking and listening in the planning stage

In any initial preparation for a topic, as well as considering unit outcomes based on the relevant syllabuses and available resources, teachers need to plan time for talking and listening-related tasks throughout the unit. Many activities cannot be completed without some talking and listening, but talk is not the primary focus of the activity, rather it is incidental to the task. There can be no guarantee that students are exposed to different kinds of talk unless they are deliberately planned for and assessed within the unit.

It is always important for teachers to consider ways of determining students' prior knowledge of the topic. Talk, through small-group or whole-

class discussion, is one way. In the unit Natural Disasters, for example, some key discussion questions to assess informally students' prior knowledge might be:

What do you think a disaster is?

Can you remember anything that was described as a disaster? Tell me about it.

What do you think a natural disaster is?

What do you think would be the difference between a natural disaster and a disaster created by humans?

The teacher also needs to find out, either from the students or their previous teachers, whether this topic builds on any work the children have already done. Links to any other key learning areas should also be investigated, for example science (volcanoes, avalanches and earthquakes), maths (interpreting or making graphs), health (how to survive a natural disaster, health issues and personal choices).

During this preliminary part of the unit talk is primarily used to determine what the students already know and requires only anecdotal information or recall of superficial factual information. The teacher can also gauge the current interest of the students in the topic and provide some motivation for learning about the topic.

Teachers need to consider carefully the tasks they design for any unit to ensure opportunities for exploratory talk are present. Just because students are talking, it does not necessarily follow that they are deepening their understanding of a topic. In planning for talking and listening as they design and negotiate a unit, teachers might ask themselves the following questions:

- What questions will I ask the students to determine their prior knowledge?
- What activities will generate in students talk to do or make something?
- Will students be required to report back on a task?
- What activities can I design that will require students to solve a problem, explore an issue or consider alternative viewpoints before completing a task?
- Will the activities require students to
 - listen to other students' opinions?
 - clarify ideas?
 - provide examples to support ideas or justify opinions?
 - challenge others' views?
 - analyse and evaluate a range of information from a variety of sources?
- Will the activities enable students to
 - develop a joint understanding?
 - use other students as a 'trigger' to their learning?
 - synthesise information and apply it to new contexts?
- How will I assess each student's use of talk as a tool for learning? For example, will I
 - observe individual students in a group situation?
 - have students report back to the class?
 - have students do a formal presentation?
 - have peer and self-assessment at the end of an activity?

The use of talking and listening throughout a unit: developing content knowledge

The major part of a unit should provide any number of opportunities for children to listen to and engage in different kinds of talk. In the early stages where there needs to be much input, activities such as listening to guest speakers, viewing documentaries, reading from a wide range of sources and discussions on specific questions related to the topic all serve to build students' knowledge of the topic and lend themselves easily to talking and listening for information. Asking students to build a volcano or an avalanche or design a seismograph requires talking to do something. But what of *exploratory* talk? What activities could be designed to enable exploratory talk to happen?

Communicative activities

Communicative activities, developed initially in the 1970s as a teaching approach for second-language learners, can be easily designed to encourage exploratory talk. The key element of communicative activities is that students must talk and listen to each other in order to complete a specific task. There are two main kinds of communicative activities, *information gap* activities, such as barrier games, and *collaborative* activities, such as problem-solving tasks, rank-ordering games and role play.

In information gap activities, each student involved has a slightly different piece of information. Student A must talk and listen to a partner B who has the 'missing' or 'different' information required. Conversely, student B must talk to and listen to partner A who has the 'missing' or 'different' information student B requires. Only by talking to each other can the students successfully complete the task.

Collaborative activities require the students to talk and listen to each other to reach consensus and so achieve a common goal. Cooperation is required and students are challenged to use talking and listening to develop an understanding of the topic, to use language to explore ideas, clarify and justify opinions and to develop social skills such as negotiating, turn taking and learning from others. Collaborative activities are particularly useful for encouraging exploratory talk.

Communicative activities depend upon students working either in pairs or small groups, so beforehand the teacher must have considered such things as who will work together and how the pairs or groups will be organised. Some initial questions to consider would be:

- Will students choose their partners or groups or will they be selected?
- Will good language models be available to students who need support in pairs/groups?
- Will the pairs/groups be ability-matched or mixed?

Examples of collaborative communicative activities (in this case rank-ordering tasks) for the topic Natural Disasters could be:

You have been given one hour's notice that a force 6 cyclone is approaching your town. There is a cyclone shelter nearby. List the things you would take with you to the shelter and justify your choices.

You have 8 items to take with you on an excursion into a volcanic crater. Choose from the list of 13 your 8 items and place them in order of importance. Do this individually, justifying each of your choices, then as a small group you must reach a consensus. The items are: torch, rope, two-way radio, breathing apparatus, fireproof suit, water, compass, batteries, food, tools for collecting samples, containers for samples, thermometer, visor cleaning agent.

An extract of the transcript of talk from a group of Year 4 students engaged in the rank-ordering task about volcanoes appears below. The three students were each given the list of items and asked to rank eight items only in order of importance and write these on a sheet. They were then asked to read out to the others their lists, which were all different. Next they discussed the items and had to come to an agreement about the eight items and their order which they recorded on a separate sheet of paper.

The first two items negotiated were the breathing apparatus and fireproof suit. The transcript extracts show examples of exploratory talk where students are justifying opinions and using information from the other students to rethink choices and help each other with ideas to support choices.

- John: *I think tools because you're scientists and you really need to know about it so . . .*
- Tim: *I put containers next 'cause if they're hot or something you don't want to walk around with them in your hand.*
- Tony: *I had water next.*
- Tim: *I had two-way radio because if you're lost.*
- John: *You can know where you are. So what was your next one Tony?*
- Tony: *I had water*
- Teacher: *So you think water is more important than a two-way radio?*
- John: *Because you could ring someone up and they could drop water to you.*
- Tim: *Next I had batteries 'cause if your two-way radio breaks down then you can't get help without a radio.*
- Tony: *I reckon you should put rope down 'cause even if your batteries do run out you can just get out of there.*
- Tim: *Torch. I think torch.*
- John: *I don't think torch because it may not be dark down there. But if you've got all that lava down there and all that heat you won't need a torch.*
- Tim: *Right.*
- Tim: *I thought batteries 'cause again if you can't see when you're going down and you went down the rope you'd need batteries, otherwise if the rope snapped . . .*
- John: *You don't need batteries.*
- Tim: *Yes I know but still.*
- Tim: *What about water?*
- John: *Well it wouldn't be much use taking water down 'cause it would probably evaporate in the heat.*

This next section of transcript shows how the students have clarified their thinking and feel more confident about the choices made after talking to each other.

Teacher: What items did you leave out Tony?

Tony: I left out the visor cleaning, and um the compass, and the thermometer 'cause the compass you wouldn't really need to know your way around in the volcano and um the visor cleaning agent you could probably just take a little cloth with the rope and um the thermometer I wouldn't take cause you'd know how hot it is, you'd know the normal temperature outside so . . .

Teacher: But the thermometer's on your group list now. Are you happy to change your mind?

Tony: Yes.

Teacher: Why are you happy to change your mind?

Tony: 'Cause well you might not know actually know whether it's ten times hotter or . . .

Tim: I left out food and water. I don't think water 'cause it would evaporate, food 'cause you're down there to experiment on stuff and it may erupt while you're having lunch or something.

John: I left out compass and torch because the compass, it is important but you don't really need it down there in the volcano and torch 'cause as someone said it would probably be pretty light in there.

The students' final list was:

- | | |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| 1. breathing apparatus | 5. two-way radio |
| 2. fireproof suit | 6. rope |
| 3. tools for samples | 7. thermometer |
| 4. containers for samples | 8. batteries. |

A problem-solving task for the topic Natural Disasters could be as follows:

You are a team of Emergency Services workers. You have just heard about a landslide in an alpine resort that is a long way from the nearest large town or city. It is the middle of winter. The entire village has been destroyed. There are many casualties and a number of people are believed trapped in buildings that are buried under tonnes of rubble. Using the following headings as a guide write down the needs of the people you must consider and plan how you will go about executing them.

Needs of the people: food; shelter, medical, rescue, survivors.

Some sample considerations could be:

Food

finding emergency supplies for immediate needs
preparing and distributing to needy
long-term food needs —
re-establishing farming and transportation links

Shelter

temporary housing needs
rebuilding plans

Medical

- first aid
- medical supplies
- storage and disposal of dead bodies
- potential outbreaks of disease

Rescue

- use of emergency services personnel
- weather conditions
- transportation of equipment — diggers, scaffolding, etc
- use of helicopters

Survivors

- finding survivors
- reuniting families
- identifying bodies
- managing panic
- grief counselling

The exploratory talk involved in a group or pair reaching consensus on this problem should involve students in listening to and then talking about each other's ideas, listening to and considering each other's views. This in turn pushes each student to consider additional elements in the task as well as clarify and refine their ideas.

Communicative activities such as those above provide students with the opportunity to talk about the topic for a specific purpose. Through talk the students deepen their understanding of the topic. The appeal of these more open ended tasks also adds to students' motivation and enjoyment of the unit. The skills of comprehending, analysing, synthesising and evaluating information from various sources are all incorporated within the activities and teachers can assess student development, cognitive, linguistic and social, informally through observation or in a more structured way through observation guided by checklists or proformas. These assessment notes can be added to student portfolios as a record of their development in talking and listening.

A sample observation might look like this:

Student	Date	Activity	Comment
John	3 Nov.	Rank order — volcanoes	Justified opinion. Showed understanding of environment of volcano and related human needs

The teacher's role in modelling talk throughout a unit

The kinds of questions a teacher asks inevitably provide a model for students in their own group work situations. Teacher awareness of the kinds of questions they ask students will help to extend students' understanding and language structures. Studies on teacher questioning (e.g. Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) have repeatedly found that teachers overuse the 'Initiation

Response Feedback' pattern of questioning. For example:

Teacher: What is the name of the material that comes out of a volcano?

Student: Lava.

Teacher: Right.

While this type of questioning has a place in determining *student recall of factual information* it limits the student's opportunity to explore new ideas or make links to existing knowledge. More open ended questions such as 'What happens when a volcano erupts?' provide many more opportunities for talk and learning. Teachers can ensure that students experience more challenging kinds of questions that require more thoughtful responses, either through planning their oral questioning or by providing written questions on discussion worksheets. A teacher can also incorporate a student's non-technical response to a question into a subsequent question to extend vocabulary and conceptual understanding. For example:

S: The water would dry up in the volcano.

T: Why would the water evaporate?

One way to demonstrate and model exploratory talk for learning is to design a task which a small number of students perform while the rest of the class listen to what is said and later report back on what they have observed. This technique is known as a 'fishbowl'. The students who are observing the small group engaged in the task may have a proforma which guides them as they think about how the students in the fishbowl are performing during the activity. To give students practice in using a peer assessment proforma, two or three of the observing students could be allocated only one student engaged in the fishbowl exercise, so the observers only have to observe and concentrate on filling in the proforma for the one student. The importance of following the rules for working in groups could also be examined within this activity.

An example of a peer assessment proforma is shown below. This proforma can also be adapted for students to self-assess their individual performance in a task.

Activity	Always	Sometimes	Never
Contributes useful ideas to the discussion			
Asks clear and thoughtful questions			
Extends other student's ideas			
Justifies opinions			
Draws conclusions from what others say			
Makes relevant and constructive comments			

Working in groups	Always	Sometimes	Never
Listens to others			
Takes turns			
Asks questions of others to clarify what is said			
Disagrees politely			
Stays on task			
Respects the ideas of others			

Adapted from: *Now You're Talking* (DEETYA, 1994) and McGregor and Meiers (1987) *Talking and Listening K-12*.

Conclusion

The importance of talking and listening in any classroom cannot be ignored. All talk has a role and planned and frequent opportunities for different kinds of talk in the classroom will assist students to deepen their understanding of existing concepts and build new understandings as they move through primary school. As teachers in the middle and upper primary years get started with planning for talking and listening, the important things to remember are these: *What kinds of talk will be included in a topic and what activities will generate the identified talk?*

When talk, especially exploratory talk, is placed at the heart of curriculum, thinking and learning can and will happen.

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